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DE RUEHIN #0896/01 0760916
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 170916Z MAR 06
FM AIT TAIPEI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9163
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 4895
RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 6092

UNCLAS AIT TAIPEI 000896

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [OPRC](#) [KMDR](#) [KPAO](#) [TW](#)
SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS AND U.S.

¶1. Summary: Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies continued to focus their coverage March 17 on the freeway electronic toll collection system scandal, the year-end Taipei mayoral race, the rally planned by the DPP for March 18, and other local issues. The pro-independence "Liberty Times," Taiwan's biggest daily, quoted U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Peter Rodman in a banner-headline news story on its page two that read: "U.S. Official: China's Military Expansion Alters the Status Quo Across the Taiwan Strait." The pro-status quo "China Times" ran a news story on its page four with the headline: "[DPP Chairman] Yu Shyi-kun Changes His Remarks: the Constitutional Reforms Will Not Touch on [Taiwan's] National Flag and Title." The pro-unification "United Daily News," on the other hand, carried a news story on its page four with the headline: "If the Congress Blocks a Constitutional Amendment Proposal, [the DPP Administration] Will Hold a Referendum on 'Certain Specific Principles.'" The sub-headline added: "The DPP and the Government Meet to Work out a Timeline [for Taiwan's Constitutional Reforms]; the Two Ways [to Push for Constitutional Reforms] - via the Congress and via the Referendum - Will 'Not Contradict Each Other.' [High-ranking Officials] Decline to Indicate Clearly Whether the Referendum Will Involve [Taiwan's] Official Title and National Flag."

¶2. In terms of editorials and commentaries, a "Liberty Times" editorial said it hopes that the "Three Party Security Dialogue" between the United States, Australia, and Japan, scheduled to start tomorrow, will alert the Taiwan people about China's aggressive nature. Washington correspondent James Wang said in the "Washington Review" column of the pro-independence "Taiwan Daily" that Beijing now sees opposition to 'de jure Taiwan independence' as its most urgent and important task. Nat Bellocchi, former AIT chairman and now a special adviser to the Liberty Times Group, opined in the limited-circulation, pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" that the debate in Taiwan and Washington on President Chen Shui-bian's decision to cease the functions of the National Unification Council (NUC) and the application of the National Unification Guidelines (NUG) may be setting the tone for future cross-Strait politics. An editorial in the limited-circulation, pro-independence, English-language "Taiwan News" discussed the DPP's planned rally for March 18 and said "The greatest danger to our autonomy lies in ignorance abroad about Taiwan's plight and apathy at home among many of our own people who do not sufficiently appreciate or cherish our hard-won right to choose our own road." End summary.

A) "Taiwan People Lack Required Vigilance Against China's Aggressive Nature"

The pro-independence "Liberty Time" [circulation: 600,000] editorialized (3/17):

.... The entire world is concerned about China's non-peaceful rise, while Taiwan, the first to bear the brunt of China's [non-peaceful rise], appears indifferent to China's military expansion. For one thing, the pan-Blue camp has more than once blocked the [U.S.] arms procurement bill [in the Legislative Yuan], hindering Taiwan from building effective defense deterrence capabilities and paying no attention at all to the lives, properties and safety of the 23 million people of Taiwan. Also, according to a poll survey released by the Institute for National Policy Research, more than 30 percent of the respondents said they have no idea that China is an undemocratic country. This is really unbelievable. In other words, some Taiwan people are unaware of the threats posed by a totalitarian regime to their democracy. They also lack sufficient vigilance of, or countermeasures against, the [potential] dangers of China's attack against Taiwan, triggered by the Chinese leaders' moves to ignite the nationalistic sentiments of its people. This newspaper therefore hopes that the 'Three Party Security Dialogue' that will be held by the United States, Australia, and Japan tomorrow will alert the Taiwan people to pay attention to the crisis of Taiwan's survival and pass the [U.S.] arms procurement bill as early as possible. Taiwan needs to strengthen its national defense and vigilance so as to effectively deal with the threats posed by China's non-peaceful rise."

B) "Beijing Upgrades Its [Official] Level But Softens Its Tone When Responding to [Taiwan's] 'Cessation of the National Unification Council and National Unification Guidelines'"

Washington correspondent James Wang said in the "Washington Review" column in the pro-independence "Taiwan Daily" [circulation: 100,000] (3/17):

.... Chen Shui-bian's announcement to 'cease the functions of the NUC and application of the NUG' was in reality a decision that put Taiwan back on a democratic track. Taiwan will not regard union with China as its only option [for the future] and will not accept 'unification' as its predetermined destination. Such a development will have a great impact on the international community, especially on the United States' false 'one China' policy, and this will be the international ramification that China is most concerned about. Thus, in response, Beijing pulled out the 'one China' principle that it had forced the international society to accept and accused Chen's 'cessation of the NUC and NUG' as 'a serious provocation against the internationally acknowledged one-China principle and cross-Strait peace.'

"Beijing's [current] strategy is to move its line of defense a little bit backwards and look at Taiwan as de facto independent. What it wants to prevent is 'de jure Taiwan independence.' Beijing's new defense line is to define Taiwan's constitutional reforms as 'de jure independence' and it will take the opposition to 'de jure Taiwan independence' as its most urgent and important task. ..."

C) "Taiwan-US Ties: All Politics Is Local"

Nat Bellozzi, former AIT chairman and now a special adviser to the Liberty Times Group, opined in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] (3/17):

.... The issue of 'ceasing' the National Unification Council and guidelines seems to have blown over, but some differences of opinion - most likely resulting from domestic politics in both Washington and Taipei - continued to be debated. This debate may be setting the tone for future cross-strait politics. ...

"The US needs to find a way of maintaining its interests in East Asia in the face of China's expansion, both in the region and internationally. The US' relationship with China will inevitably be an important factor in cross-strait issues. At the same time, the US will need to keep abreast of political changes in Taiwan's relatively young democracy."

D) "Let the World Hear Taiwan's Voice"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taiwan News" [circulation: 20,000] editorialized (3/17):

"... Numerous opinion polls show that the majority of our people generally grasp what is really at stake. For example, a poll of 1,072 Taiwanese released Wednesday by the Institute for National Policy Research showed that 83.1 percent think 'the government cannot decide on its own whether on unification or independence without the approval of the people,' with only 5.6 percent disagreeing. Nearly 66 percent rejected the claim by Beijing that 'Taiwan is a province of the People's Republic of China,' while 9.5 percent agreeing with it. The fact that these majority findings cross political boundaries demonstrates the spread of the value of 'democratic self-determination' among Taiwanese. This result also offers the most salient and potent rebuttal of any arguments by either the United States or the KMT for the retention of the misbegotten National Unification Council and its undemocratic National Unification Guidelines, which were single-handedly created by the KMT in the early 1990s. ...

"Indeed the INPR poll, and other similar previous surveys, indicates a high sense of anxiety over whether the current nature of cross-strait economic interaction is truly beneficial to the welfare of most of the Taiwan people and our democratic way of life. ... The greatest danger to our autonomy lies in ignorance abroad about Taiwan's plight and apathy at home among many of our own people who do not sufficiently appreciate or cherish our hard-won right to choose our own road. ..."

KEEGAN